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Savannah District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

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Golden Knights Jump into New Building

former President George Bush and a crowd of 300 join in



Golden Knights Black Team member jumps into ceremony carrying the North Carolina State Flag.

by Jim Cunningham
photos by James Jordan

May 13, 2004 could not be a better day for such a dedication. The Savannah District's new facility for the Golden Knights greatly enhances the prestige of this premiere Army unit. The modern 35,000 square foot facility increases their comfort and ease of operation.

The sky fits the forecast perfectly, partly cloudy. The contrast of the white clouds to the blue sky is idyllic. From 10 a.m. the anticipation begins to mount. The U.S. Army Golden Knights Black Team will jump into a ceremony to dedicate their new headquarters, the Brig. Gen. Joseph W. Stilwell Jr. building. The excitement builds not only because of the anticipated jump but also for the arrival of the guest of honor, former President,

George H. W. Bush. Some even wonder if it is he who will jump in with the Golden Knights Black Team!

At the same time members of the Golden Knights scurry about setting up chairs and an awning for the celebrated guests. Among the guests is the family of the namesake, Myra Stilwell, wife of Brig. Gen. Joseph W. Stilwell, Jr., and her daughter, Kiki, and son and his wife.

Sgt. 1st Class Joel Rowley invites the media on a tour of the building and the first thing all notice is the abundance of trophies and medals on display in the front foyer. In 43 years of existence, the Golden Knights earned 408 national championships, 65 world championships, 14 national awards and six world team titles in formation skydiving. These awards were not earned without paying a

heavy price. The Memorial Room in the center of the building attests to that fact. In 1974 the entire team of the Golden Knights perished in an airplane crash in Colorado, killing all 14 members. Their pictures hung in the Memorial Room along with pictures of other members of the Golden Knights that have perished in combat and training accidents.

As Sgt. 1st Class Rowley leads the media down a long hallway, many stop to read the captions on the photos hanging on the walls in the hallway from events dating back to 1959, the year the Golden Knights were formed. At the end of the hall is the lounge, a very large room with more photos and artifacts from the long history of the Knights. Leather-clad furniture neatly populates the vast area with vending machines along the walls.

Next are the rooms in the middle of the building, which include a theatre, two training rooms complete with gym equipment and rooms for folding and packing parachutes and a very specialized dark room for photography.

It is hard to imagine the excitement over this new facility. After all, the Blue Angels (the Navy's demonstration team) and the Thunderbirds (the Air Force demonstration team) have their headquarters that house their many awards and legacy. It is only when the media finds the facility from which the Knights are moving does the story become evident. Like a "rags to riches" story the Knights move into this new state-of-the-art facility built under the direction of the Savannah District.

At last former President Bush arrives with the other featured speakers for the event, the Commander of the United States Army Parachute Team, Lt. Col. David W. Standridge; Commander of the

18th Airborne Corps, Lt. Gen. John R. Vines, and Accessions Command commander Lt. Gen. Dennis Cavin.

"Ladies and gentlemen, if you look skyward the Black Team of the U.S. Army Golden Knights Parachute Team..." the announcer's words fill the air releasing the anticipation in the crowd. From 12,000 feet up they begin dropping from the airplane and streaking downward with red, white and blue smoke trailing from their boots. As the first parachutist opens his parachute, the flag of the state of North Carolina appears from the canopy. All land precisely on the mound just in front of the crowd to enthusiastic applause. The ceremony continues with remarks from the four guest speakers.

Fortunately the first three speakers remarks are short and to the point. Lt. Col. Standridge recounts the story of how the idea for the building came to be and praised the Army Corps of Engineers for doing such an excellent job. When former President Bush begins to speak the entire area becomes quiet. Most all are aware of the former Presidents early morning workout in the new wind tunnel built for training the Golden Knights Parachute Team. He remarks how he felt while floating suspended in the air just as he would be while falling to earth at 120 miles per hour!

The former President of the United States, has jumped with the Golden Knights and trained with them for nearly four years now. His next jump will be in the company of the Knights and to celebrate his 80th birthday! "This will be your last jump, one way or the other!" said Barbara Bush, according to the President. The former President's remarks get a rousing standing ovation especially when he opens up his jacket and reveals the American Flag on the inside!



This is truly a "rags to riches" story. The new building featured above was built under the direction of the Savannah District and carried out by Engineer Design Technologies. It is 35,000 square feet of luxurious room compared to the very small World War II era building.



Myra Stilwell, wife of Brig. Gen. Joseph W. Stilwell Jr., and her daughter, Kiki, remove the cover from the plaque dedicating the building to Brig. Gen. Joseph W. Stilwell Jr. the founder of the Golden Knights.



The U.S. Army Golden Knights Parachute Team spent 43 years in this very small and cramped World War II era building.



Former President Bush's remarks get a rousing standing ovation especially when he opens up his jacket and reveals the American Flag on the inside as Lt. Gen. Dennis Cavin and Lt. Gen. John R. Vines look on.



Savannah District Program Manager Diego Martinez gets a good laugh when former President reveals the American Flag on the inside of his jacket.